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ABSTRACT

Authentic evaluation of educational achievement directly measures actual performance in the subject area. Standardized multiple-choice tests, on the other hand, measure test-taking skills directly, and everything else indirectly or not at all. Also called performance assessment, appropriate assessment, alternative assessment, or direct assessment, authentic evaluations include a variety of techniques such as written products, portfolios, check lists, teacher observations, and group projects. All forms of authentic assessment can be summarized numerically or put on a scale to make it possible to combine individual results and to meet state and federal requirements for comparable quantitative data. Authentic assessment, developed in the arts and apprenticeship systems, is today most widely used in evaluating writing. Similar approaches are being developed with open-ended mathematics questions. Authentic assessments are also being developed for science, history and social studies, and reading. Assistance in the evaluation process by community groups, parents, administrators, and university faculty will help ensure that racial and cultural biases do not distort the assessment process. Authentic evaluation can provide more information than any multiple-choice test possibly could. As they promote the thinking curriculum everyone wants for children, authentic evaluations will provide genuine accountability. (SLD)

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WHAT IS AUTHENTIC EVALUATION?

National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)

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National Center for Fair & Open Testing

What Is Authentic Evaluation?

Authentic evaluation of educational achievement directly measures actual performance in the subject area. Standardized multiple-choice tests, on the other hand, measure test-taking skills directly, and everything else either indirectly or not at all.

Also called "performance," "appropriate," "alternative," or "direct" assessments, authentic evaluation includes a wide variety of techniques, such as written products, solutions to problems, experiments, exhibitions, performances, portfolios of work and teacher observations, checklists and inventories, and cooperative group projects. They may be the evaluation of regular classroom activity or take the form of tests or special projects.

Authentic evaluations indicate what we value by directing instruction toward what we want the student to know and be able to do. They are appropriate to the student's age and level of learning and the subject being measured, and are useful to both teachers and students.

All forms of authentic assessment can be summarized numerically or put on a scale. Therefore, individual results can be combined to provide a variety of information about aggregate performance at the classroom, school, district, state, and national levels. Thus, state and federal requirements for comparable quantitative data can be met.

Authentic assessment was developed in the arts and in apprenticeship systems, where assessment has always been based on performance. It is impossible to imagine evaluating a musician's ability without hearing her or him sing or play an instrument, or judging a woodworker's craft without seeing the table or cabinet. It is also impossible to help a student improve as a woodworker or musician unless the instructor observes the student in the process of working on something real, provides feedback, monitors the student's use of the feedback, and adjusts instruction and evaluation accordingly. Authentic assessment extends this principle of evaluating real work to all areas of the curriculum.

The most widely used form of authentic assessment in education today is in writing. For example, twenty-eight states, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and many other nations ask students to write on assigned topics. The essays and stories are graded by teams of readers (usually teachers) who assign grades according to standard guidelines. The readers are trained and retrained throughout the process to maintain reliable standards, a process that produces a high degree of agreement among judges. As with all the examples, this methodology can be used to evaluate classroom work that has been collected in a portfolio; it only has to be adjusted for subject area and student age.

Similar procedures are now being followed with open-ended mathematics questions. These ask students to write their own response to a problem. There is no single way to find a

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"right answer" because the question is designed to see how a student thinks through a problem, thereby indicating her or his ability to use math. The answers are scored by groups of teacher-readers, again following a standard grading procedure. Two-sevenths of the NAEP math questions will be open-ended in 1990.

Performance assessments in science ask students to plan or perform experiments or use scientific apparatus, as is done in New York state. Science assessments can be graded by observation (where a teacher or other observer uses a checklist) or by scoring the students' written answers to the questions. These assessments can be developed to indicate understanding of basic scientific concepts and methods.

History/social studies assessments frequently require group projects, such as preparing a history of the neighborhood or discovering how a group of people changed a law or policy, tasks which allow students to demonstrate that they grasp important concepts about history and about democratic processes. Foreign language assessments ask students to use the language in a real-life situation, orally and in print.

For young students, reading is best evaluated by having a student read aloud from material of varying levels of difficulty, while keeping a record of "miscues" that reveal the reader's strengths and weaknesses and the strategies used to solve problems. The reading can be taped and reviewed by teacher and student for further analysis and to monitor progress. For older and younger students, the material can be discussed to evaluate comprehension and critical thinking. A writing assignment responding to the ideas of the reading passage can reveal the student's proficiency and thinking in both reading and writing.

All these assessments can be designed to closely follow the curriculum. They provide continuous, qualitative data that can be used by teachers to help instruction. They can be used by students, who can learn to assume responsibility for their portfolios and records and thereby engage in regular self-analysis of their work and progress. They provide a direct measure of achievement and therefore are worth the time spent preparing for and doing them. They also encourage an intelligent, rich curriculum rather than the dumbed-down, narrow curriculum fostered by teaching to and coaching for multiple-choice tests.

Teachers can and should be assisted in the evaluation process by community groups, parents, administrators, and university faculty. Outside participation can ensure that racial or cultural bias does not distort the assessment process. For example, a team can examine student portfolios and then compare their evaluations with those of the teacher. These teams should also be helpful in strengthening the evaluation capabilities of teachers by providing feedback.

Authentic evaluation will provide far more information than any multiple-choice test possibly could. The costs of teacher involvement in designing, administering, and scoring new assessments can be counted as part of professional and curriculum development, since no other activity involves teachers more deeply in thinking about their teaching, its objectives, methods and results. Schools and communities will see that authentic assessments are promoting the thinking curriculum everyone wants for our children, and thereby providing genuine accountability.